

UPDATE

Hope for People with Deadly Peanut Allergy

Life-threatening reactions to peanuts may soon be a thing of the past for millions of people around the world who are allergic to the legume. An experimental treatment that involved monthly injections successfully muted the severe reactions of people who risk death if they ingest the slightest amount of peanut protein, according to a study in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Approximately 1.5 million Americans are allergic to peanuts, and 50 to 100 people in the United States die each year from anaphylactic shock after being exposed to the legume. Peanut allergy can be so severe that people have been known to develop symptoms after eating just 1/2,000th of one peanut or kissing someone who has eaten peanuts.

Scientists who released the results of the study at the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology conference in Denver said the medicine is not a green light to eating peanuts. It increases the threshold of sensitivity to the peanut from accidental ingestion. Even if people with the allergy do all they can to avoid peanuts, it's not always enough. Schools or day care centers may not be fully aware of the problem and waiters may not have enough information about ingredients.

The treatment allowed volunteers who would normally develop symptoms after consuming a single peanut to eat an average of eight peanuts before experiencing nausea, pain, vomiting, hives, throat tightness or other symptoms. And because the shots block the chemical pathway responsible for other types of food allergies, the treatment may help people allergic to eggs, cats, dogs and other types of nuts, according to the study. However, the treatments didn't work for everyone and it may take a while for the therapy to get to consumers. Final testing has been halted because three companies are in court squabbling over rights to the treatment.

In the study, only the patients who got the highest dose of the antibody showed significant improvement, and the treatment cut sensitivity to peanuts in 76 percent of those volunteers. But in 24 percent of those cases, the volunteers were able to consume the equivalent of 24 peanuts before showing signs of a reaction. Scientists have experimented with traditional allergy shots in the past, but the rate of side effects has been too high. The drug would have to be taken throughout a person's life because it doesn't completely block the allergic reaction.



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